

# **A Highland Moderate Minister: The Life and Culture of Rev. John Downie, Minister of Urray, 1788-1811**

DAVID M. M. PATON, M.A., M.Ed., Ph.D.

Moderate Highland ministers have not, in general, received a very good press. In contemporary accounts of religion and society, their religious style, particularly their preaching, is not merely criticised but derided. In this tradition, the Moderates of the era of the Highland crisis betrayed their people. Their preaching was inept and unscriptural, their pastoral work ineffective and their characters too worldly. Their Gaelic was often poor and they abandoned their congregations during the most serious crises, the clearances and the Disruption of 1843. They were also characterised as the creatures of disputed presentations, although it should be remembered that at this period all clergy were more or less tainted by patronage since all were appointed by patrons, under imperfect procedures to allow popular expression of choice. We need to ask, using the minister of Urray and his locality, the area in Easter Ross that includes the two Presbyteries of Dingwall and Tain and the Synod of Ross as focus, what was it in the Moderates' characters or beliefs that attracted so much abuse. Did they really accomplish so little? Or will it be found that the Moderate clergy of Ross accomplished more than tradition and rivalry have alleged during these years?

Moderate and Moderatism are terms whose meaning is fluid, not to say, contradictory. In the conflict between two parties in the church practices and theologies confronted each other. The Moderates complained about the Evangelicals undermining their authority by permitting people to separate from their parish and adopt without censure a different minister; the Evangelicals complained about the Moderates making entry to the communion table too easy, for example. The Moderates were attacked on grounds of practice and theology. These criticisms are best seen in the various religious histories that the

passions of the time brought forth.<sup>1</sup> Their evidence is clear and detailed but, as a complete body of evidence, is biased. There are virtually no apologetics from a Moderate point of view. The nature of the evidence is largely anecdotal. The anecdote is however purposive. Each man or minister whose profile is presented as an embodiment of the Christian life, in particular the Evangelical version. There is very little of Moderate anecdote, indeed very little that establishes a man a Moderate in principle. The various “lash” pamphlets also reveal the mindset and practice.<sup>2</sup>

For most of the twenty years under consideration the word “Moderate” was strongly and negatively emotive. A man such as Murdo Cameron, minister of Criech, was regarded as a Moderate by the Evangelicals since his personal standards were so low, but he was careful to invite Evangelical ministers to conduct annual communion. Another criterion was whether the minister gave adequate prominence to personal redemption in his preaching. If not then he, too, was more Moderate than Evangelical. There are one or two examples of previous Moderates seeing the light late in their career and accomplishing the work of redemption. The criterion was by implication behavioural rather than theological. The only criterion that the evidence can really sustain is the opinion held of him by tradition. The question becomes which of the northern ministers were accounted as Moderate, as passing for Moderate in tradition. The evidence is not systematic but is quite

---

<sup>1</sup> The best known of the Highland religious histories is the Rev. John Kennedy's *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* (Edinburgh, 1861) and the most personal is the Rev. Donald Sage's *Memorabilia Domestica; or Parish life in the North of Scotland* (Wick, 1889).

<sup>2</sup> “The Substance of a Speech addressed to the Synod of Ross, April 1810, by a member of the Court”. “Remarks on the Substance of a Speech, in a Letter to the author by an Old Seceder”. The next pamphlet, “Substance”, was written in a broadly moderate viewpoint by the Rev. John Downie, who died shortly after its publication. “Remarks” was written by a local extreme Evangelical and seceder, Robert Findlater. Two further pamphlets completed the controversy – “Strictures” and “A Lash”, which gave it the name.

consistent in who was accepted into the religious histories, a *post facto* rather than contemporary judgment. Such a definition also implies that a man is a Moderate not simply because he is not an Evangelical. The definition is more positive. Moderatism had its own belief system and behaviour that were sustaining and unifying. The burden of this paper is to explore the various currents of thought of the Moderates in these years, centring on John Downie.

He is an interesting figure in Highland religion for the period 1790 to 1810. He embodies the values of the Moderate party and was witness of the Year of the Sheep. His doubts and arguments are a mirror to the conflicts around him. He was born in Aberdeen in 1727, was ordained to Gairloch in Wester Ross, and transferred to Stornoway in Lewis and thence to Urray in Easter Ross, in 1788.<sup>3</sup> The length of time he spent as a minister in the remote Outer Hebrides parish may indicate some judgment on his character by the Seaforth family. As he had spent so long in a predominantly Gaelic society in Lewis, one may reasonably assume that his Gaelic was at least adequate for his task. He was perhaps something of an outsider. He was not a member of a clerical kindred, families that provided something of a backbone to the ministry in the north.<sup>4</sup>

His son Alexander was the minister in a longstanding disputed settlement at Lochalsh parish in 1792. Sage's view of the younger Downie was "I could not fail to notice the glaring deficiencies of his ministerial character. His sermons were literal transcripts from Blair 'et hoc genus omne'. These he read in English, and translated into the purest and most elegant Gaelic".<sup>5</sup>

The elder Downie was a more significant figure altogether. We first hear his voice in his entry to Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account* (1793). The points he makes are broadly in line with the other clergy whose response was dominated by the awareness of an inadequate food

<sup>3</sup> *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, vii, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vii, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica*, 256.

base. Some clergy were moving towards a critique of the regular famines and the unwise reliance on a single foodstuff, the potato.<sup>6</sup>

Over-population of the Highlands, which most clerical observers saw as the root of the problems of the region, is much referred to in Downie's entry in the *Old Statistical Account*. The parish of Urray was very much part of the Seaforth MacKenzie ambit. The estates which appear as part of Urray in the 1756 Valuation Roll<sup>7</sup> all belong to MacKenzie families, Seaforth and Fairburn being much the most extensive. There is one exceptional estate – that of the Frasers of Lovat, whose lands had not yet been returned after the 1745 rebellion. The overall total for Urray is £2568. Urray was smaller and poorer than most of the Easter Ross parishes, and much more akin to those on the western seaboard.<sup>8</sup>

What is clear straight away from Downie's response is that the parish, despite the MacKenzie political and economic resources, was barely improved at all. Further, Downie himself was a committed improver. That is to say he was a keen proponent of the tranche of agricultural innovations – enclosure, crop rotation, planting trees for timber, different ploughing methods and other techniques – that were being used by both landowners (MacKenzies and Munros showing the way) and tenant farmers (often tacksmen in origin). In retrospect the evictions seem inevitable, a clear result of the failure of other less extreme techniques and policies.

Once improvement was fully embarked upon, including the funding of innovation by increased rents, there could be no turning back. The first to suffer were often the tacksmen whose term of rent was made shorter and whose rate higher, so that the tenant was under financial and economic pressure. This pressure was transferred to sub-tenants and mailers, living already at the margins of society. This group begin to be presented in the decade from 1805 to 1815 as a redundant population.

<sup>6</sup> *The statistical account of Scotland 1791–1799 (OSA)*, Urray, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Valuation roll, 1756.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Richards, *The Leviathan of wealth: the Sutherland fortune in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1973), *passim*.

At first, some provision was to be made for those displaced by the changes. Infrastructure was improved, which funded some employment. Harbours were built to encourage those displaced to take up fishing and other trades. They were encouraged to build better dwellings in villages clustered round the edge of the sea.

As always the Sutherland estate led the way. There were early clearances in the further reaches of Strathnaver and the enclosed farms leased to two Northumberland sheep farmers, Marshall and Atkinson. Investment of a more industrial nature was attempted, most notably at Spinningdale in Creich parish, but it proved to be too far away from its natural markets to be viable. The factory, which had been well supported by the local lairds of Ross and Sutherland, burnt down in 1809. This whole process, the attempt to produce more varied employment possibilities, is carefully examined in Richards, *The Leviathan of Wealth*.

The cruelty and systematic clearance of the 1810s and the 1820s were not yet implemented. The adherence to improvement land use and philosophy was not at this stage ready to endorse clearance. For example, the repeated call by the ministers for the glens to be farmed according to the new techniques of husbandry brought north by such as the two Cameron brothers, whose activities formed the narrative of the Year of the Sheep in 1792. It may seem naïve to expect that agricultural change of the kind envisaged in the Highlands could be completed without massive dislocation and suffering. The generation of ministers replying to the *OSA* in 1793 or a year or two later did believe that. They called not for clearance but for better infrastructure and manufactories to support the regional economy. Clearance was a policy undertaken in failure, an attitude far removed from the comparatively upbeat assessments in *OSA*, itself an important aspect of the improvement agenda, and framed to elicit conclusions consonant with the views of Sir

John Sinclair, who designed and circulated the 21 volumes of the account.<sup>9</sup>

In Urray, in the account written by Downie, the over-population was partly disguised by incoming “mailers” who were prepared to work even the very poor and marginal land:

The mailers are those poor people who build huts on barren ground, and improve spots around them, for which they pay nothing for a stipulated number of years ... From this increase of the cottagers, and the great quantity of improved ground, an increase of population has undoubtedly taken place within the last 20 or 30 years.<sup>10</sup>

There were other population pressures: “The new settlers are not all natives of the parish. Several come down from the Hebrides, from the west coast, and mid-Highlands when a severe season has destroyed their cattle”.<sup>11</sup>

Improvement was under way, if hesitantly. There is no way of overlooking the minister’s support for improvement, whether by laird or tenant. At this point even enclosure (and its concomitant evictions to accommodate it) seemed a good development:

Most of the gentlemen have inclosed their farms; and, by putting them into a rotation of fallow, corn, and green crops, give a laudable example in agriculture to their tenants.<sup>12</sup>

Downie’s enthusiasm was tempered by irritation. Blaming the victims for their own poverty and their inability to improve themselves and their situation was an argument common in writings about the clearances. In

<sup>9</sup> Sir John Sinclair was a Caithness landowner and politician, who designed and circulated the second Statistical Account as he had the first.

<sup>10</sup> *OSA*, vii, 254.

<sup>11</sup> *OSA*, vi, 255 (Parish of Urray).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Parish of Urray.

the most famous of the improvers' justifications, James Loch's *Improvements on the Estates of the Marquis of Stafford*, admittedly at a later date, 1820, the Gaels are represented as fickle and unreliable.<sup>13</sup> The clearances are a benefit for only the landowner. The tone of Downie's arguments is not severe, but it is hardly sympathetic. He is an intelligent witness whose arguments are economic rather than social. There is no comment on the effects on the community as a result of any changes.

The tenants, however, have not yet surmounted their prejudices in favour of old customs, and are satisfied with following the mode used by their grand-sires, except in the culture of potatoes, which has taken place only within the last 30 years. The lands are still open; nor do they shew any desire to have them inclosed.<sup>14</sup>

Improvement is a process that even the middle class of farmer can benefit from. Downie attacked the coal laws and called for the establishment of more manufactories. In the end, however, he came down firmly in favour of improvement.

The mode of farming amongst the common people is far from being improved; and it may be further remarked, that there seem to be local obstacles to improvement, which manufacture only can remove, by introducing riches. The tenants allege they cannot afford the experience of inclosing their lands, or of paying interest for inclosing them; and even if they were inclosed, they say, they cannot live out of their ordinary crops so long as it would be necessary to put their farms in the modern rotation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> James Loch, *An account of the improvements on the estates of the Marquess of Stafford and Salop, and the estate of Sutherland* (London, 1820), 51.

<sup>14</sup> OSA, 248, Urray.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 257, Parish of Urray.

The term “farm” connotes more than just a single tenant. Farms were usually let on a nineteen-year lease and had many dependants, some with their own smallholdings. The tacksmen were often the first victims of evictions since the incoming sheep farmers wanted their land to put to graze.

Downie was concerned with the economics of the event more than its social results, but unlike many of his clerical colleagues who, in a sentimental way, regretted the demise of the tacksmen – the last gasp of that moribund institution, the clan. Downie wanted the tacksmen, in their role of farmer, to stay since he saw them as the engine of improvement. His considered views are expressed in *Hints Toward the Improvement of the Counties of Ross and Cromartie*, published in 1893, the same year as his *OSA* entry. His strategy for Highland regeneration is the same as the *OSA* entry, but there are one or two illuminating emphases.<sup>16</sup>

He talked here about improvement and the obstacles it faced. He deprecated over-reliance on the potato, but the arguments he raised on that point were economic; it was not the potential for disaster that attracted his attention but the inefficiency and unwillingness to change practice revealed. He focused on the tenant farmers:

It is evident they have not ability to improve the lands already in culture, even had they skill and encouragement beyond what they have; far less improve the tracts of waste ground in their respective farms. By living on potatoes for seven or eight months of the season, they contrive to pay their rent, in order to preserve a home; but it cannot be expected they will improve the soil.<sup>17</sup>

His attitude to improvement shows us his thinking about clearance or rather those improvement practices that involve enclosure and the

---

<sup>16</sup> “Hints Toward the Improvement of the Counties of Ross and Cromartie”. *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

necessary exclusion of the old tenant farmer and his replacement by a more up-to-date southern farmer.

To accommodate him, from five to twenty families must be dismissed, of whom neither man, woman, or child know any business, except the agriculture to which they have been accustomed. They cannot retire to a town, for there is no employment there for them. The only alternative to which they can have recourse, is either to leave the country, or be wedged into some other corner of the estate, where they are like to come to poverty themselves, and hurt those whose lands they have got a share. This is verified in the few sheep farms we have. The old inhabitants are scattered up and down the country, in a declining state, and a dead weight upon others.<sup>18</sup>

Other aspects of economic life are commented on in a notably detached style. There is no assessment of what such innovations would have on the spiritual life of either community or individual. This is a vision entirely secular. And from a personal point of view it places Downie among the community of improvers and enlightenment theorists. It was the time also when Christian philosophers such as Thomas Chalmers were trying to reconcile the demands of religion with the demands of secular ethics in a unified social and religious critique.<sup>19</sup>

There is little to please an Evangelical in Downie's account; no sense of society being essentially an arena of religio-moral order; no sense of things of spirit taking priority over all aspects of life. Downie's treatment of social deprivation reads somewhat unsympathetically to a modern commentator. He is telling us of the proper value of child labour.

We have immense numbers of mailers or cottagers, whose children, together with those of the common farmers, are a burden to the

<sup>18</sup> "Hints", 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

parents, till they are ten or twelve years of age; and during that early period, contract habits of idleness and vice, which seldom forsake them. In other countries children are taught to work from four years of age.<sup>20</sup>

There is no hint here or elsewhere in his writings of the necessity of providing such children with religious or academic education in order to allow the possibility of redemption; the children here are simply economic units. It is not a picture that would have appealed to his more engaged Evangelical colleagues.

Indeed, Downie's attitude to religious matters was curiously relaxed. "A clergyman of the Episcopalian Church of Scotland resides in the parish. About a fourth part of the people attend his meeting. He has two other places of worship in the neighbouring parishes. When he is absent, his ordinary hearers attend the parish church as punctually as the other parishioners. There are no dissenters of any other denomination".<sup>21</sup> The rationale is quite clear. Attendance at the local parish church, and by implication, at important occasions such as annual communion, is welcomed even for occasional and unconverted Presbyterian Christians or Episcopalian. The high number of Episcopal adherents is easily explained. Urray was almost completely dominated by the Seaforth family. They were traditionally Jacobite but did not "come out" during the '45, although the Earl of Cromartie and other leading MacKenzies did. The Episcopal Church community was deeply committed to Jacobitism and the defeat of the '45 was a disaster for them. It also made them the object of the government's attention, as politically dangerous. Both Seaforth and Cromartie had to work hard raising troops from their estates before being let back into the Westminster orbit.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Downie, "Hints".

<sup>21</sup> *OSA*, Urray.

<sup>22</sup> For administration and return of estates after 1745, see Annette M. Smith, *Jacobite estates of the forty-five* (Edinburgh, 1982).

The Highland crisis of the early nineteenth century had three interdependent major themes, all of which were relevant to John Downie and Urray: economy and land, religion, and language. Most attention has been given to the land aspect – the clearances. The pressures behind the clearances were the demand for higher rents on the part of the landowners who, now that they were integrated into the Westminster state, needed more rent to sustain a London presence. A different population pressure resulted in emigration which at this stage was not approved of by the lairds – they wanted to keep the people in other pursuits than agriculture. The common people were not yet regarded as “redundant”. For some years the Earl of Selkirk held out the promise of a new life in Canada for the Highlanders. In conclusion, as J. M. Bumsted makes clear in his account of the emigrations, the pressure behind emigration and, in a slightly different way, being much other leaving of the glens is:

... increase of population beyond the capacity of the country to support it; removal of tenants in estate consolidation, chiefly for sheepwalks; and most crucial of all the active circulation of seductive accounts of the advantages of America.<sup>23</sup>

Religion, the development of a very austere popular Presbyterianism, was to some extent a result of the evictions. Would, for example, the people have adopted so passive a response had it not been for the clergy bidding them so? The belief system was individual. Religion allowed no social or communal protest likewise at revivals and mass communions. These communal assemblies were a gathering of the dislocated, spiritually and physically.

Easter Ross in the late eighteenth century was still a very conservative area, economically, lacking a modern infrastructure. Mowat observes:

---

<sup>23</sup> J. M. Bumsted, *The people's clearance: Highland emigration to British North America, 1770–1815* (Edinburgh, 1982), 99.

The widely accepted and generally unexceptional portrait of the area as a whole in 1750 is one in which pastoral farming formed the main basis of the economy. The local population reared black cattle which were sold for the southern market. The money thus obtained was used to pay the rent and to buy such necessities as could not be made at home.<sup>24</sup>

There were difficulties also for the landowner/capitalist, even those who, like the Sutherland family, had vast resources and are not a typical example. The much smaller estates in Easter Ross were however just as enthusiastic for improvement as the larger.

As the century wore on there can be little doubt that the economic rewards, real or imaginary, to be derived from improvement loomed ever larger in the minds of those whose increasing integration into Southern society made them more aware of the differences between attitudes current in the North and those generally elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

The victims of the clearances were overwhelmingly the Gaelic speakers. As their communities fractured, Gaelic became particularly associated with worship, thus further isolating their communities from the intercourse of power.

The initial impression of the Moderates in the north is one of a comparative failure, which contrasts with the austere attitude and achievements of the Evangelical ministers in the region. It reminds the reader of so many of the binary conflicts that are such a feature of Scottish history – protestant and catholic, Hanoverian and Jacobite, and now Moderate against Evangelical.

In assessing the surviving evidence, one has to make allowance for major deficiencies. Firstly the histories, particularly those written in a

<sup>24</sup> I. R. M. Mowat, *Easter Ross 1750–1850: the double frontier* (Edinburgh, 1981), 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

local context, biographies of popular ministers, celebratory volumes about the Ten Years' Conflict, and the final triumph of the Disruption in 1843 tend to be written with an overwhelming Evangelical bias. The Evangelical party and the new Free Church which was the result of the Evangelicals' efforts attracted much the greatest support among the people. In consequence there is a certain amount of "history written by the victors". To some extent this aspect of the evidence can be reviewed in the light of some quite frank evidence given in public, to government or Church Assembly reports as to the state of education in the Highlands.

The Evangelicals, and in principle the Moderates also, were strong believers in the eschatological or providentialist view of history. Each event, no matter how modest reveals the considered purpose of the almighty. The efforts of the Evangelicals in preparing for the Disruption was justified by the climax in 1843. Still more was the Free Church divinely validated by its spiritual achievements – including the revivals that took place during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. Thus the Free Church and its adherents had a very special task: the maintenance of Christ's crown attributes which were under threat. For them the Disruption was more than a successful political campaign which it superficially resembled – rallies, publications, petitions and so forth – but an overriding religious duty. And naturally the Evangelical party saw their own campaigns and views as divinely blessed, and the Moderate agenda as lazy, irreligious and worldly.

An important aspect of the ambient religious culture concerned the role that the Moderates played in the 1790s and 1800s. The Evangelicals' achievement was their ability to keep their communities unified during the economic crisis and the clearances. By contrast it might be said that the Moderates' greatest achievement was to keep the processes and presence of the kirk intact; the work of the eighteenth century was not to be wasted by the nineteenth. Nor were the Moderates opposed only by their colleagues, including the missionaries and schoolmasters in remote areas who could afford to be more critical in their opinions, since they were so physically cut off from any kind of

censure or discipline. The presence of other teachers or prayer leaders, whether it be one provided by the voluntary bodies or sent by the Haldanes in their campaign following the revivals of 1799 and 1800 in the Highlands, not ordained by the Established Church, but undoubtedly possessing religious prestige in their own communities, weakened the power of the ministry. These were “the men”. Most observers have seen a political aspect to this; the local religious leadership “the men” have been presented as stepping into the power vacuum left by the Moderates’ abandonment of their people during the clearances. I have argued elsewhere that the prime attribute of “the man” was his religious authority. There is little evidence to suggest that they did take over specifically ministerial functions, preaching and administration of ordinances of religion; rather “the men” had an iconic significance. They represented how the community defined itself. The Moderate clergy tended to reject the contribution of “the men” as being a challenge to their own position as ministers. This was particularly the case in relation to schoolmasters in remote areas taking prayer meetings and Bible exposition. Sometimes the perceived offenders were itinerant missionaries, perhaps funded by the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK, founded 1709).<sup>26</sup>

The Moderate clergy give the impression of being beleaguered: they could not always keep control at presbytery since the Evangelicals appear to have voted *en bloc* much as a political party might in a parliamentary vote. Their influence in the north was palpably receding. The Moderates maintained their control at the national level in the General Assembly every year, but in the regions the Evangelical movement was gaining ground.

The controversy between Evangelicals and Moderates was seen by many as a measure of the extent to which God was justifying, supporting, one viewpoint rather than another. The growth in influence of the Evangelical clergy in the northern Highlands is taken as a

---

<sup>26</sup> General David Stewart of Garth made a savage attack on “the men” as persuading the Highlanders to a gloomy passivity in religion.

reflection of a divine purpose that reached its climax in the Disruption of 1843. The classic instance of this interpretation is Hugh Miller's essay "The Two Parties in the Church of Scotland". Here Miller characterises the Moderate party with having changed its theology and beliefs, their sentiments having "ever agreed with those of the age".<sup>27</sup>

The Evangelical clergy, in this view, were the saving element in a church that in the late eighteenth century was in decline. The dead hand of Moderatism was, except for a special few, everywhere in the ascendant. If the Evangelical clergy were the true expression of the divine purpose, by implication, those Moderate clergy who did not share their spiritual assumptions and practices were necessarily inimical to God's purpose and not true Christians. In consequence, distinctions drawn between the two viewpoints often lack theological substance and are little better than common abuse. Here, for example, are the opinions of Kenneth MacDonald, Free Church minister of Applecross.

The Moderates were the creatures of forced settlements. They had not been recognised by the people as spiritual guides. They were regarded as parties who held their positions for the sake of the living. And the fact that they paid more attention to their glebe than to pastoral work, gave ground to this impression.<sup>28</sup>

He was "also known by his levity, and his indifference to the morals of the people". Not only were they lazy and worldly, but their doctrine and preaching were suspect:

Unedifying preaching was another mark of the Moderate minister. His sermons were simply moral essays. His hope for salvation was

<sup>27</sup> Hugh Miller, *The two parties in the Church of Scotland, exhibited as missionary and anti-missionary; their contendings in these opposite characters in the past, and their statistics now* (Edinburgh, 1841), 29.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth MacDonald, Free Church minister of Applecross.

founded on good works of a very superficial kind. The necessity for regeneration, repentance or faith in Christ was not insisted.<sup>29</sup>

Substantive theological differences are touched upon here. Strict adherence to the Calvinist and Knoxian formulations of faith were insisted upon by the Evangelicals. “To be born again” in faith was the crucial, and saving, experience and so it is entirely neglected in Moderate preaching.

This characterisation of the Moderates as incompetent pastors and unscriptural preachers is found repeatedly in church histories, often with very little positive evidence. In a chapter entitled “Moderatism Timid and Subservient”, Principal Macleod of New College adds the charge of obsequiousness towards the landowners, and also worldliness. He asks with a fine sense of rhetoric:

But what was Moderatism so far as the orderly study of Divine Truth was concerned? It had very little use for such a thing at all. Theology was not one of the elegant things of life in which secular culture delights; and such were the things by which this Church in its higher circles set store.<sup>30</sup>

A more subtle and illuminating charge is that levelled by Hugh Miller in his account of the *Debate on Missions*, which took place at the General Assembly in 1796. The debate was in response to several overtures from synods and presbyteries calling for support for foreign missions. Miller accuses the Moderates of regarding mission, the duty to evangelise, to bring knowledge of salvation to the ignorant as being, in certain circumstances, wrong. In particular he attacked the ideas of George Hamilton, minister of Gladsmuir, one of the most respectable Moderates of his time. Hamilton’s ideas were revealing of Moderate

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *The two parties*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> J. Macleod, *Scottish theology in relation to church history since the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1943).

attitudes, more so than he intended perhaps. The heart of Hamilton's argument is quoted by Miller:

"To spread abroad the knowledge of the Gospel among barbarous and heathen nations", he remarked, "seems to me to be highly preposterous, in as far as it anticipates, nay, as it even reverses, the order of nature. Men must be polished and refined in their manners before they can be properly enlightened in religious truths .... Philosophy and learning must in the nature of things take precedence".<sup>31</sup>

Miller derides Hamilton for implying that there are millions of people who not only have no means of embracing the gospel, but ought to have none.<sup>32</sup>

Although the terms of the debate were set in relation to foreign missions, the implications for missionary activity at home were clear. Indeed Hamilton had argued, "Why should we scatter our forces and spend our strength in foreign service when our utmost vigilance is required at home". Foreign mission would simply weaken efforts at home. This prudential argument won some considerable support, appealing more to the Moderates than to the Evangelicals whose leader Erskine pointed to the success of missions in what would now be termed the Third World. He believed that charity fed on itself. He was:

inclined to think that a wish to benefit our fellow-creatures in distant regions, and an occasional donation on their behalf, instead of lessening, will serve to increase, the compassion of the givers for the needy at home, and thus widening instead of contracting, the channels of general benevolence.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Debate on Missions 1796, Rev. George Hamilton.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Debate on missions won by Moderate group in General Assembly 1796.

The attitude to mission as revealed in this debate are, in Miller's account, representative and symbolic of the divisions in the church itself. Mission may be seen as the touchstone of Evangelicalism then and now. The exchange, and others in the debate, has other significance. What is implied in the Evangelical arguments is that mission, the conversion of the ignorant or unregenerate, is a theological necessity and a priority compared to the competing claims of civilisation or other temporal benefits. The need of conversion is prior, for example, to the need to educate. Prudential arguments about the consequences, funding or the likelihood of success, such as the Moderate speakers deployed, are not applicable in response to theological or scriptural injunctions. The prior claim of spiritual need as against temporal need is universal, even in the tragic context of the clearances.

There is an assumption among all points of view in the General Assembly that the work of mission and evangelism could be combined with the work of "civilisation". The idea had guided the enormous progress by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge and other bodies, such as the Royal Bounty Committee of the General Assembly, in extending educational provision in the Highlands. The rationale is nicely expressed by Hyndman and Dick in their 1760 Report to the Assembly, where the intention was given:

to spread the Protestant Religion, to diffuse principles of loyalty,  
and introduce civilized manners to these countries.<sup>34</sup>

The success of the Evangelicals' "capture of the Highlands" has, to some extent, diminished the very real achievements in the Highlands of the Established Kirk from 1800 to 1820. The poor provision of schoolmasters and of missionaries for the remote areas was a major theme of the parochial accounts in the *Old Statistical Account*. Downie's own parish of Urray in Easter Ross was comparatively well equipped for schooling: "A parochial school is established, and well

---

<sup>34</sup> Founding document of Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. Hyndman and Dick, 1760.

attended. The Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge support a charity school and spinning mistress, both of which are useful".<sup>35</sup>

The religious ideas that occupied the more sophisticated of the Moderate leadership in Edinburgh did not impact greatly on the Highland Moderates. They had perhaps more of a siege mentality. However, it is reasonable to ask what did the Moderates offer in a positive sense. And how, if their personal standards were so low and their preaching so thin, did the Moderates dominate church life for so long? Indeed, is the tension between Moderate and Evangelical merely a historiographical issue, concerned with the narrative of events that led inevitably to the Disruption of 1843? Does the tension have something to impart about the nature of the Highland crisis and the type of popular Presbyterianism that was developing in the region? There can be no doubt but that the minister's theological leanings had a great impact on a parish. If Evangelical, the communions would be fenced against all except a very few true Christians. There would be a greater level of lay participation. Lachlan MacKenzie, minister of Lochcarron, a popular Evangelical minister – not least because of his apparent qualities as a seer – describes the tensions between the two tendencies. At the time when he was schoolmaster for Lochcarron, the same parish of which he was later minister, he used, in addition to his school duties, to run a prayer group. The jealousy on the part of the Moderate ministers is worth exploring; there appears to have been real animosity in such anecdotes. There seems to have been a concerted attempt to prevent his being licensed as a minister:

The ground of their opposition could not have been any thing in his character or qualifications, but the hatred they bore to his pious life and evangelical opinions, with a mixture of jealousy at his constantly increasing popularity. He was kept back more than a year from getting license; but when the Lord's time came, all these obstacles were soon removed, and that in a way not to have been

<sup>35</sup> Varied provision; Royal Bounty committee, spinning schools for girls.

expected. These three who had led the opposition were suddenly and within one year called to go the way of all the earth and give their account.<sup>36</sup>

In the conflict between Evangelical and Moderate, glimpses of an ancient value system remain. Mr Lachlan was held by many in the Highlands to be a seer. His colleagues continued to “thwart his labours for the suppression of sin and the promotion of true religion”. The presbytery insisted that Lachlan MacKenzie should conduct the settlement of an intruded minister – that is, one appointed without the people having given their opinion. “Although he felt exceedingly grieved on the occasion, the presbytery had so little consideration and sympathy with him, that the clerk issued a letter to him, threatening to take legal steps for his deposition”.<sup>37</sup> He did obey, reluctantly. The presbytery of Lochcarron maintained its Moderate hue; fewer of its ministers came out at the Disruption in 1843 than in any other northern presbytery.

In his discussion of the Moderates, Professor J. H. S. Burleigh notes their theological orthodoxy, their conservatism, and observes:

No-one questioned, in public at all events, the authority of the Confession of Faith. But in their sermons Moderate preachers avoided all reference to the great doctrines of the church, and to the Reformation doctrines of sin and grace and the Plan of Salvation. They confined themselves to inculcating the moral virtues with illustrations drawn from secular literature even more than from Scripture.<sup>38</sup>

Hugh Blair, Professor Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University, from 1760 to 1783, and a leading Moderate, puts the matter succinctly in his discussion of Moderatism – “the end of all preaching is

<sup>36</sup> Lachlan MacKenzie and dispute with Presbytery, 1817.

<sup>37</sup> “The Happy Man”, anthology of sermons and Gaelic talks and addresses.

<sup>38</sup> J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (Oxford, 1960), 303-304.

to make men good .... Every sermon should be a persuasive oration. The view of the world is essentially rationalistic; we strive to understand the logic of the world around us, and the duties and obligations that such understanding requires of us. There is no contradiction with religion, in this Moderate conception since to understand the laws of nature is to reveal God's creation and to behave virtuously is to behave in a manner consonant with God's commands".<sup>39</sup>

To comprehend what the divisions in the church could mean in practice, one can do no better than examine the parish of Fearn in the Presbytery of Tain, neighbouring John Downie's parish of Urray, and Presbytery of Dingwall. We have very full documentation about the two intrusions of 1802 and 1808: presbytery minutes, reminiscences, the "pamphlet war" the episode provoked.<sup>40</sup> In the earlier dispute an apparently suitable candidate, William Simson, was opposed by the heads of families but not by the more important heritors. Put crudely, the Rev. Simson's support was from the lairds and his colleagues. He had passed his trials, so what could prevent his ordination, whatever his personal popularity? This is very much a Moderate standpoint, warmly supported by Downie and Simson. According to John Noble, a historian of the Ross-shire church writing in the mid-nineteenth century, "The people began to learn his good qualities, and soon became attached to him both as a pastor and a preacher".<sup>41</sup> The Rev. Simson would appear to have been flexible in allowing his people to attend the services of neighbouring ministers, a practice which was long forbidden by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, as tending to weaken the position of those ministers whose people went elsewhere.

<sup>39</sup> Scottish philosophy, rationalistic as we shall see, allied with improvement thinking.

<sup>40</sup> Main sources: Tain Presbytery records; Synod Records; four pamphlets of "Lash" controversy; J. Noble, *Religious Life in Ross*; Rev. C. Macnaughton, *Church Life in Ross and Sutherland*.

<sup>41</sup> John Noble, *Religious life in Ross* (Inverness & Edinburgh, 1909), 117.

Simson's successor, the Rev. Hugh Ross, like Simson a local man who had been a missionary in a Gaelic-speaking area, caused further controversy. At his settlement there was a riot which prevented the members of the presbytery from entering the kirk and proceeding with the service. There was also, in some accounts, fire-raising. The presbytery members were trapped inside the manse while the riot continued outside. Several ministers, including the Rev. Ross, wished to conduct the service in the manse, as they were legally entitled to, but a motion to that effect was voted down. A different group, Evangelicals, felt they could not allow a ministry to start in circumstances so hostile, the presentee so obviously not acceptable to the people. The Rev. Ross and others dissented from this decision and later appealed to the synod, complaining of the failure of the Presbytery of Tain to carry out his settlement. During the course of the evening a petition was given to the Rev. Ross from his future parishioners saying that if he would agree to give them their "privileges" they would allow the ceremony to take place. Mr Ross was advised to accept by some members of the Presbytery, but he remained obdurate; he could give no such undertaking until he was actually minister of Fearn. There the matter rested; he was eventually settled. Soldiers were requisitioned to keep the peace but few parishioners were willing to receive the ordinances at his hands.<sup>42</sup>

Hugh Ross's intrusion raises interesting questions about Moderatism in action and about tensions in the church in the northern Highlands. There can be no doubt but that the various parties in the controversy represented exactly the divisions in the church as a whole. The Rev. Hugh Ross was clearly arguing from a Moderate "legalist" position; he had a call properly signed and moderated, which it was the duty of the presbytery, whatever the beliefs and behaviour of his future congregation, who, judging by their riotous conduct, had clearly been misinformed and were in need of very strict pastoral guidance. Those who presented the people's petition represented popular Highland

---

<sup>42</sup> C. Macnaughton, *Church life in Ross and Sutherland* (Inverness, 1915), Ch. 9.

Presbyterianism; what they wanted was the freedom to hear and receive the ordinances of the church: baptism and communion from ministers of their choosing. Otherwise they must secede.

The threat of secession was not a light matter; the neighbouring parish of Nigg had a secession since 1756, which had included virtually the entire congregation. This had started with a separation in just such circumstances and had hardened into a full secession, because the other members of the presbytery would not allow them the ordinances of religion. To place the needs of the church as an institution and allow here the untrammelled right to compel parishioners to attend their own minister was very much a Moderate position. The well known Evangelical and theologian, the Rev. James Fraser, minister of Alness, was the single dissentient in the presbytery to this ruling.<sup>43</sup> Unable to obtain baptism for their children, many became full members of the Secession Church and severed contact altogether with the Established Church.

The episode balances nicely the controversy between Evangelical and Moderate. From the Moderate viewpoint, the authority and unity of the Established Church was in question; arguably from failing to enforce its own edicts regarding obedience and discipline. From the Evangelical perspective, congregations were being excluded from a proper ministry by the workings of patronage. For both sides the matter was of the utmost spiritual importance. All sides would have been aware that in Easter Ross, as elsewhere in the region, social and economic environment was changing rapidly and from the position of the poor or landless, very unfavourably. A strong and accepted ministry was of the essence, and visibly threatened by occasions such as the failed admission of the Rev. Hugh Ross. The freedom to receive religious ordinances where one chose threatened the power and status of the minister within his parish if his people could, without censure, abandon his ministry, and if his clerical colleagues could, likewise without censure, receive them into full membership. The parish system

<sup>43</sup> *Dictionary of Scottish church history and theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 335.

thus threatened was the cornerstone of the whole religious and social polity. The issue of whether or not people had the right to go elsewhere indicates a church structure at the limit of its cohesion.

The practice of separation (i.e. separating from the minister, not secession which implies the further step of separating from the church) was becoming widespread and, to the Moderates, dangerous. The Presbytery of Dingwall observed that “disorderly practices were alarming” and that:

It is obvious to every well-thinking man, whether of the clergy or laity that gross and pernicious abuses frequently take place in our bounds from the irreverent and disorderly conduct of many of the people who withdraw themselves from the Gospel ordinances in their own parish.<sup>44</sup>

This tension was of ancient origin. There was an Act of Assembly of 1647, much referred to during such disputes.

The Assembly, in the zeal of God, for preserving order, unitie and peace in the kirk, for maintaining that respect which is due to the ordinances and ministers of Jesus Christ, for preventing schism, noisome errorrs, and all unlawfull practices, which may follow on the people’s withdrawing themselves from their own congregations, doth charge every minister to be diligent in fulfilling his ministerie.<sup>45</sup>

The church in the region was completely divided on the whole issue of withdrawing from one’s own minister the privileges so much fought over in the Fearn disputes. Nor is this division a purely personal matter of there being two deeply entrenched personal viewpoints, subsequently labelled Moderate and Evangelical. These factions did indeed exist and

<sup>44</sup> Presbytery of Dingwall Records, 1812.

<sup>45</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638–1842* (Edinburgh, 1843).

appear to have voted *en bloc*, much as a political “interest” might have done in Parliament. The dispute was not a matter of party or political affairs, but a necessary and inevitable result of the contradiction between the strict ecclesiological structure and laws of the church on the one hand and the practices and austere ideology of Highland Presbyterian life.

Indeed the whole project of improvement in its wider social aspects of education and the provision of employment, infrastructure, and the extension of the spiritual provision in terms of more preachers, clergy and kirks may be said to have been dependent on a strong-minded ministerial leadership and an effective parish organization. This is by no means an unworthy perspective, although one may note how easily it concurs with a more general conservatism and distrust of the ordinary Gaelic speaker as being a hindrance to that development. The legalism which was at the heart of the Moderate position is relevant to our general theme. The two intrusions at Fearn just considered took place before the major clearances in the region. They offer a paradigm of religion-led protest. It would be very difficult to pass this episode off as being “really” a clearance protest, as some have tried to, with this and other similar events. The primary function of the Fearn controversy was religious; the people did not feel able to follow Mr Ross’ ministry if that minister were forced upon them. The whole proceeding was lay-led. Popular Highland Presbyterianism, the kind beginning to be articulated in Easter Ross, implied a threat to the whole parochial structure, not just its Moderate defenders.

Downie’s career brought him in conflict with the crucial developments of these years; the relations between the lay membership of the kirk and the minister. This showed itself most obviously in disputed admissions; Downie was much involved in two violently contested admissions in the parish of Fearn and wrote a pamphlet justifying his position. It resulted in a long-running dispute, known as “The Lash Controversy”. The Rev. Hugh Ross, the intruded minister of Fearn, complained to the Synod of Ross about the negative attitude

towards him of his people who took the liberty of worshipping elsewhere:

The continued dislike and opposition of the people threatened to render all the labours of their Minister useless, and obliged him to apply to the Synod of Ross for direction and assistance. The synod took the matter repeatedly into their consideration. And to them on the 17th April, 1810 was addressed, by a member of the court, a speech, exposing the anti-Christian and injurious nature of the practice instanced in the parish of Fearn; the Substance of which was afterwards published, and occasioned “Remarks by an Old Seceder”. “Remarks” called forth “A lash to the Old Seceder” and the Old Seceder published in reply, “Strictures upon the Lash”. The first of these publications was written by the Rev. Mr John Downie, Minister of Urray ... his age and his experience gave peculiar authority to his sentiments, for he was the father of the synod, and he had himself been settled in the face of an opposition as violent as it was groundless.<sup>46</sup>

The Old Seceder was Robert Findlater, merchant at Drummond, Kiltearn, who had opened Sabbath School in 1798. He was a well known Evangelical in Ross and father of the Revs. William and Robert Findlater, who assisted at the Tayside revivals of 1815–1817.<sup>47</sup> Downie died before the “Remarks” appeared in 1810. In his speech he presents his main theme immediately. For him the issue is whether parishioners can separate from their ordained parish minister and attend a neighbouring minister. Religious freedom (Privileges! Privileges!) was anathema and behind the local religious and social unrest prevailing in

---

<sup>46</sup> There are also reviews of the conflict published in, for example, the *Christian Observer*, an Evangelical journal.

<sup>47</sup> John MacKay, *The Church in the Highlands* (London, 1914), 227. At the back of the Life of Robert Findlater, there are some extremely interesting conversion narratives.

Ross. The Fearn dispute, discussed above, was a touchstone for religious toleration on the one hand or disobedience on the other.

A practice prevails among several of our people injurious to the cause of religion and to the peace and good order of society: I mean the secession of many individuals of them from the regular and established pastors of their own parishes, who hunt after other clergymen more acceptable to their taste; whose churches they crowd by their numbers, and impede the real parishioners from hearing and joining in public worship with that ease and composure of mind and body necessary for approaching their Creator.<sup>48</sup>

Downie has in mind those who separate from a particular parish, not those who separate from the church as a whole, into complete secession, as happened in the parish of Nigg in 1765. He has a different and more ambiguous target in mind. “Those who fancy themselves more knowing than others; in the doctrines of the Gospel and the duties it enjoins; and also invested with privileges and powers, of which, as they affirm it were criminal in any earthly authority to attempt depriving them.”<sup>49</sup>

This attack on “the men” carries real animus. Downie and his Moderate colleagues were genuinely incensed at the church being used to promote the interests and beliefs of a small and barely literate faction. He allowed that some may be well-meaning, willing to do what they think right, if they were assured of its being so; at the same time under strong prejudices from long habits, and especially from the “example of their friends, neighbours, and acquaintances, to whom they have been taught to look up as the prime religious luminaries of the country”.<sup>50</sup> Their arguments were deemed inept. They were “activated by pride”.

<sup>48</sup> Downie’s contribution to the controversy is the “Substance of a Speech addressed to the Reverend Synod of Ross”. I shall refer to it as the “Lash”, since that is the name by which it is generally known.

<sup>49</sup> “Lash”, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Their real danger to the church was made clear: they contradicted the minister:

If he does not embrace their creed in every the minutest article, and especially to censure those clergy who do not preach to them in the same terms, and with the same cant they themselves use which they look on as the badge and signature of true religious impressions.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, in an impassioned invective the whole popular evangelical project, men and clergy, were seen as contrary to the will of God. Downie was referring to “the men” and their undermining of the clergy’s authority:

They desert their own parishes, well aware they will be followed by as many as a real sense of religion, whim, or caprice will prevail on to be of their party. To make the whole palatable, this sanctimonious appearance is carried on under the ostentatious display of the most profound humility and self-abasement. And yet under the flimsy veil, they have the presumption, in many instances, at the time of administering the Sacrament of the Holy Supper, to dictate to their clergyman who he shall employ as his assistants, and whom he shall reject, with certification of incurring their displeasure.<sup>52</sup>

The relation of pastor to parishioner in the Evangelical perspective, the importance of community seasons and revivals were paramount. They were the instrument of bringing the sinful to recognition of their plight. In Downie’s view, the key concept was discipline, a discipline that reached back to the earliest days of the kirk. Discipline too, was at the heart of the Moderate position; may a believer leave his parish to find better preaching at a neighbouring one? An Evangelical would be lenient and allow such a separation in despite even of church regulation.

<sup>51</sup> “Lash”, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

A Moderate would assert his legal right to obedience and demand the assistance of his brothers in the presbytery to prevent this practice. For Downie, the position was clear; a minister was entitled to obedience, irrespective of his personal character. Once ordained by divine providence he was, and remained, entitled to our respect and obedience. If a man has been:

in the course of Divine Providence, solemnly consecrated and set apart, and regularly admitted as pastor of a parish, has *ipso facto* obtained a commission from our Blessed Lord to dispense his word and ordinances in that parish; which commission he is bound to execute at his peril.<sup>53</sup>

These principles were designed to strengthen the status of the clergy and put pressure on their perceived opponents; “the men” and their Evangelical colleagues. The terms are emphatic:

This commission gives the pastor a right to the obedience and support of every well disposed Christian within that parish, for the successful discharge of the ministerial duty.

And,

That such parishioners as refuse or withhold that obedience and support from their pastor fail in their duty to the blessed Saviour whose commission he bears; but especially that such as openly and avowedly secede from his ministry, and show a practical contempt for his person, and the word and ordinances dispensed by him, give a deep wound to the interests of religion in that parish, for which they have cause to fear they must give an account before the Highest tribunal.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> “Lash”, 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Downie is admirably clear on the obedience due to a sinful pastor:

The Lord Jesus Christ, in his unsearchable wisdom, sees proper in some instances to admit wicked men to be pastors in his Church, but he does not permit their hearers to judge of their heart. That power he reserves to himself alone, and to assume it to ourselves is encroaching on his prerogative.<sup>55</sup>

Downie's final comment on what constitutes ordination is carefully designed to depend on biblical foundation. The support of the parishioners is not a divine commission, and necessarily superior to a commission deriving from consent of the people, which is necessarily of human origin. Thus the Evangelical formula, based essentially on parochial acceptance, can be effectively challenged:

The question is not whether you consented to the settlement of your clergyman or not, but whether he has a commission from our common Saviour to preach the word, and to dispense the sacraments of the New Testament to the inhabitants of your parish.<sup>56</sup>

Some of Robert Findlater's observations on Downie's speech challenge received views of ordination and its meaning, inward and outward:

Our ministers must preach to us by their life and their conversation; giving testimony of the grace of God: the Holy Spirit also witnessing their call to the office, by effectually calling sinners by their ministry. This must ever be the consequence and never failing fruit of being called of God.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> "Lash", 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> "Remarks", 3 ("Remarks on the Substance of a Speech" etc.).

A true consecration must come from God, not the church. Downie is moving towards asserting that only those born again have received God's mandate, accordance with the doctrine of regeneration. This type of minister of whom Downie is presented as a specimen cannot understand the mystery of faith:

By all his qualifications he could not so much as understand the first principles of the particular doctrines of the Gospel, which he heard preached by Christ – nay it would appear he doubted the truth of them. *How can a man be born when he is old? How can such things be?* No answer but doubtful and double asseverations, which are answered with double asseverations, confirming the truth of this doctrine.<sup>58</sup>

Findlater's key concepts, reflecting on the nature of the Moderate clergy are rhetorically and repeatedly set out:

I ask, how can they be ministers who have not been taught by the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit?

Neither will the consecration of all the holy and unholy hands of the church laid together on his head, obtain a commission for him from the Lord Jesus Christ to dispense either word or ordinances anywhere and that your proposition has no foundation in the word of God.<sup>59</sup>

Downie develops his account with a picture of how the parochial system is failing as a result of the activities of “the men”:

An open and avowed secession of the people from their parish minister for such causes as have been mentioned, has an hostile influence on the cause and his Gospel in every parish where it unhappily takes place. The harmony, affection, and goodwill which

<sup>58</sup> “Remarks”, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

ought to prevail between the pastor and his people are torn up by the roots, and succeeded on the part of the seceders by a sour, disdainful distance, which sows the seeds of hatred, malice, animosity and reviling among the people.<sup>60</sup>

Downie concludes his account with an analysis of the Fearn settlements already considered. The allegations he makes against the crowd are substantial.

We have had lately a melancholy instance of this turbulence and animosity in the settlement of a neighbouring parish, in opposition to a man whose moral character and qualifications of the pastoral office are acknowledged by all who know him. If the actors in this scene of riot and confusion have any acquaintance with the first principles of the Gospel, they must know that it is highly criminal and absurd to use the weapons of Satan to advance the cause of Christ. Where was the religion of the Gospel ever advanced by means of bludgeons, stones, and fire raising.<sup>61</sup>

This is the settlement at Fearn discussed above. The accusation of deliberate fire raising on the part of “the men” and their Evangelical sympathisers gave great offence. The implication would appear to be that “the men” were a danger in every sense – spiritually and criminally. This charge was rejected by such Evangelical ministers as, for example, the Rev. William Forbes of Tarbat who saw some of his own people during the so-called fire-raising during the first attempt to settle the Rev. Hugh Ross. Downie’s final observation regarding “the men” is expressed in violent symbolic terms. “But these gentlemen did not ask leave of him to raise a fire upon the earth, fetched not from heaven but from that bottomless pit, to grieve, vex and annoy their pastor”.<sup>62</sup> “The men” were the most obvious enemies of the Moderates, but one is still

<sup>60</sup> “Lash”, 30.

<sup>61</sup> “Lash”, 31.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

surprised at the violence of Downie's attack. Surely "the men" were, in the end, a marginal grouping in the Highlands' religious community. This may be true and there is no doubt "the men" stirred up very strong passions.<sup>63</sup>

Downie's document attempts to establish an unchallengeable narrative of fire-raising and bludgeoning; of inconsistency in doctrine and non-scriptural practices. That such events should take place in a civilised area like Easter Ross need not surprise—the region had a reputation throughout the period for violent protest and factionalism, culminating in 1843 when the General Assembly of the new Free Church instructed the Synod of Ross to issue an instruction to its people forbidding the use of force or obstruction at the settlement of Established clergy replacing those who had "come out" at the Disruption in 1843, so high was the factional conflict.

His pamphlet was significant in other ways. As we have seen, he was keen to establish that religious extremism (as embodied by "the men") led to social disorder (symbolised by the Fearn settlement disputes). He was attacking popular Presbyterianism, of the kind which John MacDonald of Ferintosh was developing; the device of blaming everything on "the men" enabled him to avoid directly criticising the members of either the Presbytery of Tain or the Synod of Ross.

The Moderates in the early 1800s, and their leaders at national level were not simply negative in their attitude to the Highlands. The years after 1810 saw unprecedented investment in the region; new schools, missions, manses and clergy were financed. It was perhaps the one time that the Edinburgh elite took proper cognisance of the north and its problems.

Downie himself took part in the national debate, over improvement in the northern Highlands. But too late; the engines of improvement were well prepared. The years of 1790–1810 looked fine, in retrospect

<sup>63</sup> Stewart of Garth, in his "Manners", is particularly vituperative regarding "the men" and itinerant preachers. David Stewart, *Sketches of the character, manners, and present state of the Highlanders of Scotland; with details of the military service of the Highland Regiments* (Edinburgh, 1822).

idyllic, as the alternatives to traditional farming were designed and put in place with the resulting social destruction.

Downie himself died before the main clearances took place and before the last of the “Lash Controversy” pamphlets. The evidence he offers is truly contemporary. It is not an unworthy record.

*St Albans*